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ABSTRACT

The influence of academic, demographic, and social characteristics of college freshmen on sophomore enrollment status was investigated, along with reasons for attrition. A total of 139 freshmen at St. Edward's University in Texas were surveyed at the beginning and end of the freshman year, using the Survey of Entering Freshmen and the End of Freshman Year Survey. Significant differences were found between returners and leavers on grade point average, perceived difficulty of courses, students' satisfaction with the availability and variety of courses, expectations of finding people to date, finding their classes challenging, and expectations of the university in general based on the catalog. While students' intentions regarding enrollment at entrance did not appear to be related to their sophomore year enrollment status, intentions measured at the end of the freshman year were fairly accurate predictors. Those students who were dissatisfied with university life, and especially with social activities and with courses available, also appear to be potential leavers. In addition, students who were not continuing in required courses for the degree may be potential leavers. (SW)

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RETENTION -- WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE FRESHMAN YEAR?

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This paper was presented at the Twenty-Third Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26, 1983. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
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ABSTRACT

In recent years the focus of retention studies has shifted from pre-enrollment characteristics to trying to determine what occurs or does not occur during the freshman year to make freshmen not enroll for their sophomore year. St. Edward's University surveyed U. S. national students at the beginning and end of their freshman years. Significant differences were found between returners and leavers for GPA, perceived difficulty of courses, students' satisfaction with the availability and variety of courses, and expectations of making friends at college, finding people to date, finding their classes challenging, and expectations of the University in general based on the catalogue. The results suggest that those students who say they may leave probably do so, and students dissatisfied with university life or not on a usual academic track should be considered potential leavers.

RETENTION -- WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE FRESHMAN YEAR?

While student retention has been a major topic of study in many colleges and universities during the past five years, the focus of recent work in this area has changed. One area that appeared promising in predicting student retention was pre-enrollment characteristics; i. e., what is known about students before they begin their freshman year. However, after a rush of studies of these characteristics [Terenzini and Pascarella (1978), Brasher, Bloom and Paynter (1980), etc.] little useful information has been gained. Majority sentiment about the results of pre-enrollment studies has been summed up by Scout (1981):

> What happens to the student after he is at the university is more important for retention than improvements or changes in the criteria used to select those students. . . If one wants to lower the rate of student attrition, it is suggested that one look at what happens to students during their freshman year, since most withdrawals take place prior to the sophomore year. p. 7

This quotation has great relevance for St. Edward's University. St. Edward's University is a small, private university in Texas with an enrollment of 2,200 students. A review of our retention rates shows a consistent pattern over the past six years: the greatest loss of students occurs after their freshman year. The retention rate for the second fall semester has been between 51% and 59% for the past six years.

The purposes of this study were (1) to determine whether selected academic, demographic and social characteristics, measured at the end of the freshman year, related to sophomore enrollment status, and (2) to provide more information about the reasons students give for leaving.

The second semester of the freshman year was targeted for study for two reasons. First, by the end of their freshman year students have had the opportunity to observe and interact with the academic and social aspects of the campus. Secondly, previous studies have identified the freshman year as a critical period in deciding whether or not to remain in school. Approximately forty-five percent of the freshmen at St. Edward's do not return after their freshman year. By surveying the freshmen after they have had almost two full semesters in which to form their perceptions of the school, and right before the critical summer during which the final decision to leave or return is made, it may be possible to identify those factors associated with dropping out after the first year. Social variables have been added to this study which have not previously been used in predicting attrition at St. Edward's. Including this wider range of predictors and information about the student's first year may result in a better prediction of which students will return and which students will not. It also may be possible to profile the academic and social characteristics of the "high risk" student, and eventually to identify and work with these students during the second semester of their freshman year.

METHOD

Subjects. Subjects were 139 second semester college freshmen enrolled in second semester (Spring) English courses. All subjects were United States nationals. Demographic characteristics of these subjects (English course, sex, division of major, fall residence, spring residence, hours per week of

employment and types of financial aid received) are shown in Table 1. These 139 subjects represent 47% of the U. S. nationals from their entering (Fall 1981) class, and 56% of the Fall 1981 entering freshmen who were enrolled on the 12th class day of the Spring 1982 semester.

Instruments. Two researcher-designed survey instruments were used in this study.

The End of Freshman Year Survey (EFYS) is a 62 item questionnaire which concerns four major areas: (1) demographic characteristics of respondents; (2) respondents' enrollment intentions for the following Fall (first semester sophomore) semester; (3) respondents' satisfaction with various aspects of their university experiences including academic facilities, academic support services, academic practices, general facilities, campus social activities, university policies and practices, and overall university atmosphere; and (4) respondents' perceptions of social, personal and academic aspects of their freshman year and of the university overall. Satisfaction ratings use a four-point scale in which a rating of one indicates a high degree of dissatisfaction and a rating of four indicates a high degree of satisfaction; perception items use a four-point scale in which a rating of one indicates that a statement is "very untrue" for the respondent and a rating of four indicates that the statement is "very true" for the respondent.

The Survey of Entering Freshmen (SEF) is a 100 item questionnaire which assesses respondents' demographic characteristics and their expectations about university life. Eleven items which concern expectations for or perceptions of university life appear on both the EFYS and the SEF. These items are answered using the four-point "very untrue" to "very true" rating

scale described above.

Procedures. The End of Freshman Year Survey was administered to students during their English classes about a month before the end of the Spring 1982 semester. Completion of the survey was voluntary. Administration was carried out by the staff of the University's Office of Planning and Institutional Research using a standardized set of instructions.

Data from the Survey of Entering Freshmen were obtained from research office records. The SEF had been administered to students as part of their freshman orientation. Administration was carried by research office staff.

Respondents' enrollment status for the Fall 1982 semester (the first semester of the respondents' sophomore year) was obtained from the University Registrar's 12th class day records.

LIMITATIONS

The procedures described above introduced several limitations into the sample of students completing the EFYS. First, only courses in which U. S. national students were enrolled were surveyed. While St. Edward's is interested in retaining students from other countries, these students have historically been studied as a separate group for retention purposes. It is felt that the reasons why international students stay or leave would be best determined by a separate study. Second, although administration of the EFYS in English classes was time-efficient and produced a relatively high rate of returned surveys, it excluded several groups of students. Students who were absent from their English class were not surveyed. In addition,

students in advanced English courses which freshmen could enter only on the nomination of their first semester English instructor and students in one developmental English course were not surveyed because the proportion of second semester freshmen in these courses was too small to justify disturbing an entire class. Finally, the sample was biased in favor of students who completed two semesters of freshman English and excluded students who did not sign up for a second semester English course or who dropped English during the first half of the semester. Because it seemed possible that persistence in an English course itself would be related to third semester enrollment, rates of return for students attending St. Edward's and not enrolled in English courses and for survey respondents and non-respondents were compared (see Tables 2 and 3). These comparisons suggested that students in second semester English courses at the end of the semester did in fact return in greater numbers than students who were not enrolled in an English class. Differences between returners and leavers on the EFYS may therefore have been minimized by the high rate of return for respondents.

RESULTS

EFYS Items. Table 4 shows the significant differences between returners and leavers obtained from t-tests conducted on End of Freshman Year Survey items. Also included in this table is the one other variable that showed a significant difference between groups -- GPA. Six items dealing with student satisfaction with different aspects of their college experience (tutoring services, social activities, variety of courses offered, availability

of courses, concern for you as an individual, and the University in general) showed significant mean differences. In all cases, the returners expressed greater satisfaction than did the leavers. Two statements from the section of the survey in which students rated how true statements were for them showed significant mean differences. It was truer for returners that the catalogue gave an accurate idea of what life at this University would be like (returner $\bar{X}$ = 2.39, leaver $\bar{X}$ = 1.92). However, it was truer for leavers that the courses were too easy (returner $\bar{X}$ = 1.72, leaver $\bar{X}$ = 2.00). The average GPA for returners (2.80) was significantly higher than for leavers (2.54).

SEF Items. Since a relatively small number of cases for which both EFS and SEF data were available was obtained in the study, elaborate statistical analysis of these data was not possible. A simple way to look at the data is to look at changes in ratings for returners and leavers between the beginning of their freshman year (Survey of Entering Freshmen) and the end of their freshman year (End of Freshman Year Survey). Table 5 shows the statements which appeared on both surveys and showed a reversal in the direction of the ratings between the two surveys. At the beginning of their freshman year, leavers felt that it was truer for them that they would make many close friends at college than did returners (returner $\bar{X}$ = 3.36, leaver $\bar{X}$ = 3.43). But, at the end of their freshman year, returners felt it was truer for them that they had made many close friends at college, than did leavers (returner $\bar{X}$ = 3.46, leaver $\bar{X}$ = 3.20). This directional finding of leavers rating the question as more true for them at the beginning of their freshman year but less true at the end of their freshman year was also found

for the statements "I will find many persons of the opposite sex to date" and "I will find most of my classes exciting and challenging". For the statement "I will consider dropping out", the returners felt that this was truer for them at the beginning of their freshman year (returner $\bar{X}$ = 1.31, leaver $\bar{X}$ = 1.11), but the opposite was true by the end of their freshman year, (returner $\bar{X}$ =1.38, leaver $\bar{X}$ = 1.68). This same pattern of returners rating the statement higher in the beginning of the year but lower at the end was also the case for the statement "Professors will be helpful." For the other six statements that appeared on both surveys returners stated that the following statements were truer for them (on both surveys) than did leavers: "I will become involved in extracurricular activities", "I will fit in with other students" and "My high school preparation will be good enough for the work I will have to do". Leavers gave higher ratings (the higher the rating, the truer the statement) than did returners on both surveys for the following statements: "I will be homesick often", "My values and beliefs will change" and "I will experience some emotional problems" (see Table 6).

Intention to Return. Table 7 shows students' enrollment intentions from the SEF and the EFYS along with their actual Fall 1982 (first semester sophomore year) enrollment status. Ninety-five percent of those who intended to return at the end of their freshman year did enroll for their sophomore year while only 75% of those who intended to graduate at entrance enrolled for their sophomore year. Similarly, 92% of those who intended to transfer at the end of their freshman year did not return, while only 31% of those who intended to transfer at entrance did not return.

DISCUSSION

Results obtained by this study suggest, in accordance with Scout's opinion which was cited previously, that what happens to students during their freshman year is important in predicting sophomore enrollment status. In addition, results suggest that social variables, as well as the traditionally considered academic and demographic characteristics, relate to the decision to return or leave.

Results related to intention to leave or return highlight the importance of freshman year experiences in the decision to continue enrollment. While students' intentions regarding enrollment on entrance did not appear to be related to their sophomore year enrollment status, intentions measured at the end of the freshman year were fairly accurate predictors. This suggests that students revised intentions based on their actual college experience, and acted on those revised intentions.

What parts of the freshman year experience were important in forming revised intentions? Results suggest that social experiences played a part. Leavers in our sample were less satisfied with social activities on campus than were returners.

Several academic variables also seemed to relate to the decision to return or leave. While academic success is one of those variables, as shown by returners' higher mean GPA, other aspects of the academic environment including the perceived difficulty of courses and students' satisfaction with the availability and variety of courses at the university also differentiated between returners and leavers. It is also noteworthy that returners tended to be those students who continued in a required English course during

their second college semester.

In addition, one demographic variable appeared to relate to enrollment status. Students who were not employed during their freshman year tended to leave the university in greater numbers than students who had some form of consistent employment.

Results also suggest that the match between students' entering expectations and their perceptions of the university influence enrollment status. Students who left the university for the most part had higher expectations regarding such things as making friends at college, finding persons of the opposite sex to date, finding their classes challenging, etc. than did returners, while their end of freshman year perceptions in these areas were more negative than were those of returners. While conclusions in this area are limited by a small sample and a limited number of items which were measured at the beginning and the end of the freshman year, it would seem that a gap in a negative direction between expectations and experience, or more simply, disappointment with college experiences, becomes a part of the decision to leave. In keeping with this, leavers reported that the catalogue had given them a less accurate picture of university life than did returners. A study of the specific aspects of the catalogue that students felt were misleading or inaccurate is indicated.

Overall, results suggest that a number of things besides low GPA can be considered if one desired to look for and work with potential leavers at the end of their freshman year. First, those that say they may leave will probably do so. Second, those students who are dissatisfied with university life, and especially with social activities and with the courses which are

available are potential leavers. Third, those students who are not on a usual academic "track", i.e., who are not continuing in required courses for the degree should be considered potential leavers. Finally, those students whose overall expectations of the university have not been fulfilled will probably not return.

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TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF END OF FRESHMAN YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENT

	RETURNER (N=99) # %	LEAVER (N=40) # %	TOTAL GROUP (N=139) # %
ENGLISH COURSE			
8	12 (12%)	08 (20%)	20 (14%)
13	87 (88%)	32 (80%)	119 (86%)
SEX			
Male	55 (56%)	23 (58%)	78 (56%)
Female	44 (44%)	17 (42%)	61 (44%)
DIVISION			
Humanities	13 (13%)	5 (13%)	18 (13%)
Sciences	21 (21%)	10 (25%)	31 (22%)
Social Sciences	27 (27%)	2 (05%)	29 (21%)
Business	23 (23%)	16 (40%)	39 (28%)
Undecided	4 (04%)	6 (15%)	10 (07%)
Education	11 (11%)	1 (03%)	12 (09%)
SPRING RESIDENCE			
Dorm	81 (82%)	33 (83%)	114 (83%)
Off campus	3 (03%)	5 (13%)	8 (06%)
Parents	14 (14%)	1 (2.5%)	15 (11%)
Own home		1 (2.5%)	1 (01%)
FIRST FALL RESIDENCE			
Dorm	79 (80%)	31 (78%)	110 (84%)
Off campus	2 (02%)	2 (05%)	4 (03%)
Parents	14 (14%)	2 (05%)	16 (12%)
Own home		1 (02%)	1 (01%)

NOTE: Percentages for each category sum vertically.

Table 1, continued

	RETURNER (N=99) #	%	LEAVER (N=40) #	%	TOTAL GROUP (N=139) #	%
CURRENT EMPLOYMENT						
00-00 hours	58	(59%)	30	(75%)	88	(64%)
01-10 hours	13	(13%)	4	(10%)	17	(13%)
11-20 hours	18	(18%)	5	(12.5%)	23	(18%)
21-30 hours	5	(05%)	1	(02.5%)	6	(05%)
31-40 hours	3	(03%)			3	(02%)
FINANCIAL AID						
None	23	(23%)	8	(20%)	31	(23%)
Grants	9	(09%)	8	(20%)	17	(13%)
Scholarship	14	(14%)	4	(10%)	18	(13%)
Work-study	1	(01%)			1	(01%)
Loans	4	(04%)	2	(05%)	6	(04%)
Grants & Scholarships	11	(11%)	8	(20%)	19	(14%)
Grants & Work-study	1	(01%)	1	(2.5%)	2	(01%)
Grants & Loans	8	(08%)	3	(7.5%)	11	(08%)
Scholarships & Loans	3	(03%)	2	(05%)	5	(04%)
Scholarships & Work-study	1	(01%)			1	(01%)
Loans & Work-study	1	(01%)			1	(01%)
Grants, Scholarships & Work-study						
Grants, Scholarships & Loans	2	(02%)			2	(02%)
Grants, Loans & Work-study	11	(11%)	3	(7.5%)	14	(10%)
Scholarships, Work-study & Loans	1	(01%)			1	(01%)
Grants, Scholarships, Work-study & Loans	6	(06%)	1	(2.5%)	7	(05%)

NOTE: Percentages for each category sum vertically.

TABLE 2: NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF RETURNERS AND LEAVERS BY ENGLISH COURSE ENROLLMENT

	ENROLLED (Includes respondents in surveyed course-no survey and non-surveyed courses)	NOT ENROLLED (Includes never enrolled students-those who dropped and those who withdrew)
RETURNERS	122 (63%)	22 (49%)
LEAVERS	72 (37%)	23 (51%)
	194 (100%)	45 (100%)

TABLE 3: NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF RETURNERS AND LEAVERS FOR END OF FRESHMAN YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND NON-RESPONDENTS

	In surveyed course-completed survey	In surveyed course-no survey	Non-surveyed English course	Not enrolled in any English course	Dropped English course	Withdrew	Total for Non-Respondents
RETURNERS	99 (71%)	12 (40%)	11 (44%)	15 (55%)	7 (47%)	0 (0%)	45 (45%)
LEAVERS	40 (29%)	18 (60%)	14 (56%)	12 (45%)	8 (53%)	3 (100%)	55 (55%)
	139 (100%)	30 (100%)	25 (100%)	27 (100%)	15 (100%)	3 (100%)	100 (100%)

TABLE 4: END OF FRESHMAN YEAR SURVEY ITEMS WHICH DIFFERED SIGNIFICANTLY BETWEEN RETURNERS AND LEAVERS

Item	Mean for Returners	Mean for Leavers	t	p	N of Returners	N of Leavers
First year Grade Point Average (Four point scale)	2.80	2.54	2.26	.03	99	40
Satisfaction with:*						
Tutoring services	3.38	2.92	2.49	.02	40	26
Social activities on campus	2.81	2.50	2.12	.04	93	40
Variety of courses offered	2.92	2.50	2.80	.01	99	40
Availability of courses	2.76	2.38	2.47	.02	99	40
Concern for you as an individual	3.39	3.05	2.65	.01	99	40
University in general	3.39	3.00	3.26	.001	99	39
Truth for you of the statement:**						
The catalogue gave me an accurate idea of what life at this University would be like.	2.39	1.92	2.67	.01	99	39
Courses are too easy.	1.72	2.00	-2.14	.03	99	40

* Satisfaction with various aspects of the university was rated on a four-point scale where 1 = very unsatisfied and 4 = very satisfied.

** The truth of statements about university life was rated on a four-point scale where 1 = very untrue and 4= very true.

TABLE 5: END OF FRESHMAN YEAR SURVEY AND SURVEY OF ENTERING FRESHMEN ITEMS WHICH SHOWED A REVERSAL IN DIRECTION FOR RETURNERS AND LEAVERS Mean Ratings - 1 = very untrue, 4 = very true

	Survey of Entering Freshmen	End of Freshman Year Survey
I expect to make many close friends at college.		
Returners	3.36	3.46
Leavers	3.43	3.20
I will find many persons of the opposite sex to date.		
Returners	2.68	2.36
Leavers	2.89	2.25
I will find most of my classes exciting and challenging.		
Returners	3.28	3.00
Leavers	3.48	2.80
I will consider dropping out.		
Returners	1.31	1.38
Leavers	1.11	1.68
My professors will be helpful.		
Returners	3.20	3.40
Leavers	3.00	3.44

TABLE 6: END OF FRESHMAN YEAR SURVEY AND SURVEY OF ENTERING FRESHMAN ITEMS WHICH MAINTAINED DIRECTION IN RATINGS FOR RETURNERS AND LEAVERS Mean Ratings - 1 = very untrue, 4 = very true

	Survey of Entering Freshmen	End of Freshman Year Survey
I will become involved in extra-curricular activities.		
Returners	3.00	2.63
Leavers	2.89	2.28
I will fit in with other students.		
Returners	3.13	3.33
Leavers	2.96	3.15
My high school preparation will be good enough for the work I will have to do.		
Returners	2.85	2.91
Leavers	2.75	2.88
I will be homesick often.		
Returners	2.00	1.83
Leavers	2.11	2.03
My values and beliefs will change.		
Returners	2.15	2.34
Leavers	2.39	2.65
I will experience some emotional problems.		
Returners	2.22	2.06
Leavers	2.50	2.35

TABLE 7: STUDENTS' ENROLLMENT INTENTIONS AS EXPRESSED AT ENTRANCE AND AT THE END OF THEIR FRESHMAN YEAR VERSUS ACTUAL SOPHOMORE YEAR ENROLLMENT STATUS

Number and percentage with this intention who:	Intention at Entrance: Plan to graduate from St. Edward's (N=73)	Plan to transfer (N=26)	Plan to graduate in more than 4 years (N=2)	Do not plan to graduate from any school (N=2)
Returned for sophomore year	55 (75%)	18 (69%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Did not return	18 (25%)	8 (31%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)
	73 (100%)	26 (100%)	2 (100%)	2 (100%)

Number and percentage with this intention who:	Intention at End of Freshman Year: Plan to return (N=93)	Do not plan to return in fall, plan to return in future (N=5)	Plan to transfer (N=24)	Undecided (N=14)
Returned for sophomore year	88 (95%)	1 (20%)	2 (8%)	6 (43%)
Did not return	5 (5%)	4 (80%)	22 (92%)	8 (57%)
	93 (100%)	5 (100%)	24 (100%)	14 (100%)